

THE RELENTLESS DUALIST: JOHN BELOFF'S CONTRIBUTION TO PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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John Beloff is one of parapsychology's most prolific, most even-handed, and clearest writers, and the publication of a collection of his works—a retrospective of his writings—is a welcome event.¹ This collection contains 15 nonexperimental papers, ranging across 25 years of Beloff's career (from 1963 to 1988), an introductory auto-biographic piece, and a bibliography of his writings. Such a collection gives us a chance to look back on Beloff's nonempirical contribution to parapsychology.

It is not often that one gets the opportunity for such a retrospective, especially one made with the author's assistance; Beloff presumably picked out those articles he felt were most representative of his career. With this opportunity to get a full view of his career, I have been able to view his work as a whole and in so doing to see the individual articles as forming an integrated package. My review article attempts to highlight the pattern.

The book gave me a couple of mild surprises. The first came from the autobiography: Beloff studied first as an architect but quit that profession to study psychology. Reviewing this collection of papers, I tried to imagine what a Beloff-designed house would look like. Its lines would be well-defined, with no overstatement; it would be sturdy, with a good foundation; it would be modern rather than Victorian, simple rather than gaudy; it would contain no extreme parts, but there would be some stray elements, not to make a statement in themselves, but rather to acknowledge the indefinable.

Beloff states that his intention as a writer has been to match the taut prose style of A. J. Ayer; but I see a balanced architectural structure, and certainly the lack of clarity that is present in Ayer's writing is not present here. Although my students might admit the tautness of Ayer's writing, they would never describe it as clear or interesting, but those are the wonderful elements found in Beloff's writing.

¹ John Beloff, *The Relentless Question: Reflections on the Paranormal*, Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990, pp. 221, \$29.95, cloth.

loff's writing that few academicians have the gift for. In a typical understatement, Beloff declares, "I do believe that I have an ability to write" (p. 8).

The other surprise for me, about which Beloff was candid, was the consistency of both his general views and his arguments over the 25 years. Of course, he chose for this volume only 15 out of over 100 articles and abstracts written by him, and part of this consistency may be due to the selection; but it is remarkable how little his views and arguments have changed over his career.

One can simply look to his first and last books (previous to this collection) and notice his main concern. The first book is *Existence of Mind* in which he argues for dualism, concluding the book with a chapter on the evidence for dualism provided by parapsychology. His last book is *The Case for Dualism*, a co-edited book in which he contributes a chapter arguing for dualism based on the parapsychological data. Indeed, the one unfailing element in Beloff's work is his defense of dualism (or what he calls "radical dualism" in one of his papers). Although it is not clear from his autobiographical introduction, it may have been this question that drew him into parapsychology, but it is certain that his unwavering commitment to the existence of a physically independent mind became the thrust of his career. As he says: "The focus of my interest in the paranormal has always been its implications for the mind-body problem" (p. 100).

Because of this consistency of theme, and because the book offers us a unique opportunity to reflect on a quarter-century of Beloff's contribution to parapsychology, I will lay out the basic argument running throughout the book (and his career). As in any good novel, there are a number of subplots, to which I hope to do justice, but his basic argument can be stated in four steps:

1. *Dualism (interactionism) is the common-sense view, and we should retain common sense unless there are good reasons to reject it.*
2. *Psi phenomena exist, in the sense that there is good evidence for them.*
3. *Psi phenomena are mental and thus incompatible with physicalism.*
4. *Therefore, dualism should be accepted.*

Let me now turn to his basic argument and fill in some detail:

1. *Dualism (interactionism) is the common-sense view, and we should retain common sense unless there are good reasons to reject it.*

a. *Defining dualism.* Beloff defines dualism in several ways, referring in one place to mind being an "autonomous principle in nature" (p. 25), and, in another, saying that "mind and matter denote

separate domains of nature which, nevertheless, interact with one another in certain critical points" (p. 165). Dualism is the common-sense view, whereas physicalism does "violence to our commonsense intuitions" (p. 62). Thus, Beloff refers to himself as basically a conservative thinker, which to him means that he demands "very good reasons before relinquishing a commonsense position" (p. 13).

Beloff would not object, I think, to my pointing out that dualism is the *current* common-sense view, as opposed to the orthodox scientific view, but it has not been commonsensical always in our culture, and certainly it is not commonsensical in non-Western cultures. Clifford Geertz (1983) has pointed out that "the Western conception of a person... is... a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures" (p. 59). Presumably, he would admit for instance, that a traditional Australian aborigine, who did not possess this view of a person as being composed of a separate mind juxtaposed to the body, would not share the West's common-sense notion about mind. It would be rational, therefore, for the aborigine, given Beloff's argument, to *reject* dualism, even given the existence of psi phenomena, which are accepted by the aborigines but explained, of course, in a different way from Beloff's since the aborigines do not possess the same notion of mind and matter that he does.

Further, the problem remains, even in the West. Calling Descartes' mind-body distinction "the most important single insight in the entire history of philosophy" (p. 69), Beloff must admit that the concept of mind he supports depends on the concept of matter (physicalism) propounded by Descartes and others at that time. Dualism is thus a view that has been held only for several centuries in the West. Before Descartes, common sense did not support such radical dualism; therefore, it would have been rational in the pre-modern Western world to reject the dualistic view. Although Beloff might be uncomfortable with such relativism, this position does not present insuperable logical difficulties to his argument.

Moreover, it is not altogether clear that dualism is the current common-sense view. Broad (1962) was able to incorporate it in his Basic Limiting Principles several decades ago, but a radical change has taken place in the contemporary world view since that time. I have taken informal surveys of students in introductory philosophy classes over that period, and from this small sample of college students, I would say that the unreflective common-sense view has moved from dualism to some sort of physicalism. When pressed about the implications of such a view (which I specify below), the

students tend to back away from physicalism, remaining more confused, rather than to revert to dualism.

This, however, is where Beloff is pointing out something fundamental. Given the two alternatives of dualism and physicalism, acceptance of the latter presents problems. On the surface, at least, it seems that physicalism denies human freedom, moral value, responsibility, and so on. At least, this is what B. F. Skinner (1971) has argued, and much of the traditional discussion of morality has assumed some sort of dualism. Therefore, it is not so much the loss of dualism that conflicts with people's contemporary conception of the world as it is the loss of the moral dimension that has traditionally accompanied it. Thus, if dualism and physicalism are the only alternatives, and if accepting physicalism means rejecting the moral dimension because no satisfactory theory has been given to show how one can maintain both positions, then the rejection of dualism should be a step of last resort. Thus, Beloff's conservatism about the rejection is well founded in this respect.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that dualism and physicalism are the only alternatives available. I have argued elsewhere (Edge, 1990) for a naturalism in which the moral dimension has its place, but Beloff has the right to insist that philosophers address themselves to the important question of how a moral world can be maintained in a nondualistic world.

b. *Objection to dualism.* The traditional philosophical objection to dualism consists of denying that mind and matter could causally affect each other, because they are such radically different kinds of things (or in such separate "domains of nature"). Beloff, however, argues that we must be flexible in our definition of *cause*, given Hume's analysis of the concept in terms of association. All that should be meant in saying that A causes B is that A is a sufficient condition for the occurrence of B, which says nothing about the kinds of events A and B are (p. 23). He criticizes science for holding a narrow view of cause, restricting it to mechanical causation. From his perspective, one can talk of teleological causation (a hallmark of the mind, as we shall see), backward causation, and even magical causation (p. 89). In this way he criticizes Jung's view that synchronicity is noncausal. The only reason Jung holds this view is because he accepts the scientific view that *cause* means *mechanical causation* (p. 22); rejecting this equation, one can say that synchronicity describes magical causation.

2. *Psi phenomena exist, in the sense that there is good evidence for them.*

Beloff naturally does not see a need to list the evidence for psi in such a collection; rather, his concerns are with the skeptical re-

sponse to the evidence, which he argues is unfair. His argument can be classified into three types:

a. *The nature of explanation and evidence.* The skeptics have too narrow a view of explanation, taking as a model "deduction from a general principle." There are other kinds, and Beloff at one point suggests that the paranormal can be explained in another sense: by conceiving of it, "not as an isolated fact, but in terms of some broader perspective. This is what we mean for example when we talk of a critic trying to explain some new movement in the arts or a historian who is trying to explain some controversial historical episode" (p. 26). At another point, he argues that explanation (and implicitly, evidence) ought to be appropriate to the type of material one is dealing with. For instance, taking a narrow view of what counts as explanation, skeptics assume that only strict experimental evidence needs to be taken seriously (p. 148).

In fact, there are at least three kinds of evidence, requiring different kinds of explanation: experimental, historical, and legal. These correspond to three kinds of evidence in parapsychology: experimental data, records of past events, and reports of spontaneous cases by the living. What is meant by good evidence, and the nature of explanation in each, differs in the same way that the nonparapsychological data in these areas are differentially evaluated and explained. One cannot expect the same standards of evidence in all areas.

b. *Hume's argument.* The other assumption the skeptics make is to reject all parapsychological evidence based on Hume's argument against miracles. For Beloff such an extreme position produces *reductio ad absurdum* of their own argument (pp. 142, 149). A miracle is not so much contrary to nature as contrary to what we know of nature. Surely, we can construct a hypothetical case so convincing in its evidence that one would have to accept it, in the sense that it would not be rational to doubt it (p. 149) and an *a priori* rejection of it would be out of place. At the very least, the Humean argument could not work in one's own case. If I examined a phenomenon and became convinced of its veracity on good grounds, then it would be irrational for me to reject it on the basis of some blanket principle.

The skeptics are right in insisting that very good evidence be presented for events that conflict with the current scientific paradigm, particularly when viable counterexplanations based on misperception and so forth are readily available for noncontrolled experiments. Yet, Beloff is right in insisting that it is not rational to reject parapsychological data *a priori* on a blanket principle.

c. *Counterexplanation.* Given the impasse that seems to exist between parapsychologists and skeptics, how might we overcome it?

Do the skeptics have any responsibility in the dialogue, especially if we cannot accept Hume's general rejection of anomalous phenomena? Beloff suggests that the critics are obliged to present counter-explanations of the data; then, in the spirit of Hume, we could evaluate which explanation is more plausible. At one point he even designates this as "Beloff's Rule" (p. 196), which, although not infallible, is central to our being able to judge the adequacy of evidence. In this context, Beloff discusses five extreme phenomena (pp. 177-187), all of them spontaneous case material, and challenges the skeptics to give counter-explanations. In another place (p. 161), he even asks whether critics could produce the Palladino phenomena under the conditions to which she submitted. As I understand Beloff's point, it is that the critics have a responsibility to engage in dialogue that can be evaluated and criticized in the same scientific spirit as that found in normal science. Dismissive rejection is not good science (or law, or history, or art criticism).

3. Psi phenomena are mental and thus incompatible with physicalism.

Beloff distinguishes between materialism (identity theory) and physicalism, which explains mental phenomena "exclusively in physical terms, (i.e., in terms of space, time, mass, energy, etc.) plus whatever logicomathematical expressions may be necessary to frame the particular law or equation in such an explanation" (p. 125). In a telling phrase, Beloff says he has concluded that psi is incompatible with physicalism not simply on empirical grounds, but also because a physical explanation of psi is "an absurdity that can be ruled out on a priori considerations" (p. 124). These are his grounds:

a. By nature psi phenomena are teleological whereas physical events are mechanical. Much of this argument is found in an article, "Teleological Causation," that appears in print for the first time in this collection. Both mental and psi events are teleological; that is, they are goal directed. Schmidt is cited as giving data for his "goal-directed principle" (p. 93) based on his work with REGs.

Using this characterization of psi, Beloff rejects what he calls Flewism, the view that since paranormal phenomena are defined negatively, we can give no positive description of them, thus making it impossible to say they are mental. Not only can we characterize psi as teleological, but "it behaves much like any other psychological variables. Thus we find that there are marked individual differences, that performance is highly sensitive to the prevailing psychological conditions and atmosphere" (p. 170).

b. Physicalism has no way to explain how information is encoded in ESP. If we take telepathy as an example and try to explain it in

terms of normal communication, we face a problem. Information exchange must be based upon a mutually accepted code (e.g., the English language), which is either learned or is "hardwired" in the brain. Since ESP seems to work across language barriers, it would take a universal linguistic code, but we have no evidence that such a code is learned. On the other hand, Beloff argues, since no two brains are identical, the code cannot be hardwired. He argues, "The whole idea that every mental event must correspond to some specific brain state will not bear examination" (p. 127); thus, physicalism cannot explain how information can be physically encoded.

In another article, he comes back to the same theme, responding to the suggestion of Michael Thalborne that telepathic transmission may be transmission of an image or a feeling and not of semantic content, thus avoiding the sting of the coding objection. At this point Beloff falls back on the transmission problem, saying (p. 168) that no mechanism can be offered to explain the transmission. Further, there is the problem of the selectivity of ESP, i.e., that a specific person receives the information, not others. No mechanism, including Sheldrake's concept of morphic resonance, gives an answer.

c. Even normal memory cannot be explained mechanistically, so we must have reference to psi to explain memory. Not only does Beloff point out (p. 113) that the empirical evidence for the traditional theory of memory (the standard physicalistic explanation) is not very strong, but he also argues that, even if memory is stored in the brain, one must have reference to teleological causation to explain memory retrieval or activation, which in turn implies PK. "Since we already have abundant evidence that the mind can, on occasion, extract information from the external world without the mediation of our sensory apparatus and can equally, on occasion, produce physical effects in the external world without the mediation of our muscular effectors, why need we deny the mind such powers with respect to its own brain?" (p. 120)

Indeed, in a couple of other places (pp. 61, 108) Beloff argues that normal mind-brain interaction is best explained in terms of psi. The only difference is that in normal activity the mind interacts with the brain, while in psi it interacts directly on the environment, so that, for example, PK is a form of volitional activity directed on an object in the world whereas normal volition is PK directed on the brain.

Although these parallels are striking, it seems to me they comprise a conclusion we ought to avoid. After all, ESP and PK are not explanatory concepts; they merely describe the fact that information is known by a person who should not have such information, or that

there is some movement in the environment that we cannot explain physically. In this narrow sense, Flewism is correct, I think. The dualist has difficulty explaining how interaction occurs between mind and brain, but surely calling upon ESP and PK offers no more of an explanation. One cannot explain one mystery, human cognition, by calling upon an even more mysterious event such as psi. And although there are analogies between normal cognition and psi, there are fundamental discontinuities. Virtually every time I will to raise my arm, I am able to do so, or, if unable, at least I can offer an explanation why, that is, my arm is paralyzed or tied down. Yet, PK is notoriously fickle, occurring so seldom that statistical analysis is needed to verify its existence, and no viable explanation for its failure has been offered. For instance, one cannot argue that the REG is farther away from my mind than my brain, thus employing a physical analogy that effectiveness decreases with distance, since the mind is not in space, so "being farther away" makes no sense. It is legitimate to point out the similarities between PK and normal volition in order to lessen the uniqueness of PK, but it is inappropriate to argue that volition is the same thing as PK.

d. Observation theories do not make psi compatible with physicalism. Proving this statement, it seems to me, is Beloff's greatest challenge. At one point (p. 129) he brings up Braude's criticism of a causal loop as part of observation theory, but his main line of argument lies elsewhere. Observation theories, as the name implies, depend on observation of feedback (just as there is observation needed to collapse the state vector in quantum mechanics). Beloff asks whether this observation requires a person or whether a machine reading data would qualify. In quantum mechanics there is disagreement. But if a person (mind) is required, then Beloff asserts that observation theories are dualistic theories in disguise (p. 130). If observation does not require a person, on the other hand, "then we are left without any explanation as to what it is about brains that could make them potential psi sources" (p. 169). Thus, either observation theories do not make psi compatible with physicalism, or they cannot explain psi.

Beloff's argument seems unsatisfactory to me because it implies that either quantum mechanics, itself, is not a physical (scientific) theory or it does not explain anything. That is, the same question that Beloff raises against observation theories can be raised against the collapse of the state vector in quantum mechanics: is consciousness required in observation, which collapses the state vector? Extrapolating from the answer he gives about observation theory, Bel-

off would have to assert that those who answer the question affirmatively are not practicing physics because they are dualists and do not offer a mechanical explanation. Surely, that won't do. Physics is what physicists do, and it is the paradigm of physicalism.

On the other hand, would he assert that there is no explanation given of the collapse of the state vector in quantum mechanics, since no mechanism is offered? I admit that quantum mechanics is counterintuitive and the explanation is expressed merely in mathematical formalism, but surely it is an explanation.

I think Beloff is tipping his hand here. His life-long commitment to dualism is so strong and his categories of distinguishing between mind and matter are so inflexible that he is placed in a position of a priori rejecting the idea of a physicalist explanation (even in a revolutionized science) of psi. What Beloff is not open to, I believe, is that science can (and has) changed. What must be explored is whether contemporary science is offering a new perspective, that new categories may be developing to make the traditional radical distinction between mind and matter (and all its implications) obsolete, or at least open to revision. In a reply to criticisms by Steven Rosen, who wants to argue for some new conceptions of the universe (and science), Beloff (pp. 173-174) remarks that the ideas seem to be a reversion to magic and are not scientific, and one should not enlist the aid of modern physics in developing new conceptions of the world. Thus, Beloff shows himself—as befits some one who thinks the Cartesian distinction between mind and matter is the most important insight in the history of philosophy—to be wedded to a 17th-century view of the world and not open to contemporary alternatives in science or philosophy.

I am sympathetic to Beloff in one respect, however. Too often in the past, philosophers and scientists have merely assumed the truth of physicalism and have asserted that even if present science cannot explain everything, future science (physicalism 2, as opposed to the present physicalism 1, as Herbert Feigl has designated them) will. To believe so strongly in the truth of physicalism as to assert that all will be explained by some future, unknown, science (which may differ radically from present science) is unacceptable, for this is simply an a priori commitment to physicalism. It is the obverse of Beloff's position. Both arguments accept traditional definitions of mind and matter, and the difference comes in when physicalism asserts that it is a closed system and therefore does not need the mental while Beloff asserts its importance in explaining the world. As I have already argued, given this situation, with these the only op-

tions, I agree with Beloff. Traditional physicalism cannot explain a whole range of phenomena, and calling upon some unknown future science to justify traditional physicalism is totally inadequate.

Yet this is not what is happening with observation theories. There *has* been a revolution in science; quantum mechanics is universally accepted, and the Copenhagen interpretation is overwhelmingly used. New categories and expanded notions of explanation are being used in present science. To argue, in effect, that the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics is not scientific or not physicalistic is spitting into the wind.

At one point (p. 76) Beloff argues that psi is more akin to magic than to science or to religion, although he admits that magic was part of science in the high renaissance. Thus, Beloff accepts the idea that scientific categories are flexible. They have changed in the past; perhaps they are in the process of changing now. Old-fashioned physicalism, with its definition of matter as being deterministic and mechanistic, should be rejected—Beloff is right about this. But with areas of physics having rejected at least substantial parts of both ideas, it is not clear that psi is necessarily incompatible with a new version of naturalism that is being developed. Beloff may have a right to be skeptical about the chances that a new physicalism will explain psi, but I do not think we can reject this view on a priori grounds.

4. Therefore, dualism should be accepted.

This conclusion follows from the preceding premises if they are accepted; I think I have shown reason to doubt that all of them, particularly the third one, should be.

Returning to view Beloff's contribution as a whole, I see two general trends in his work besides an increase in sophistication in expressing his basic argument. The first is that he seems to become more open to and interested in the old mediumistic phenomena later in his career. I suppose this early lack of interest was due to two factors: first, it was reading Rhine's *Extra-Sensory Perception* that initially drew his interest, and Rhine's focus on the laboratory approach precluded mediumistic work. Second, the academic pressures were against such interest; it was difficult enough engaging in experimental work. The other trend was that Beloff seemed to be on the forefront of the major conceptual issues in the field. In particular, he discussed extensively the observation theory, teleology, and the challenge of the skeptics.

Beloff remains a giant in our field. Even if I cannot accept his conclusion, there is no doubt that, with good reason, he has been very influential. His ability to think clearly (and call upon all of us to do the same), his knack of presenting an argument so succinctly, his even-handedness, his penchant for being on the forefront of the field conceptually, and simply his humble presence have influenced parapsychology positively in far more ways than John, himself given his humility, is probably willing to admit.

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